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AUTHOR Fisher, Jan
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ABSTRACT

Secondary school reading teachers are confronted with the goal of enticing adolescents to a lifelong appreciation of books. Unfortunately, teaching the "classics" of literature frequently entails stylistic enrichment and understanding of literary devices, something of a "bottom-up" approach, that turns many students away from reading for pleasure. At the same time, adolescents are confronted with developmental tasks, such as establishing peer and sex roles and independence from parents, which also distract them from reading for pleasure. Reading young adult literature in the classroom is an acceptably healthy means by which students can work through these developmental tasks. Teens enjoy young adult books because, unlike the classics, these books deal with problems teens themselves are or will be coping with in their lives. The secret in motivating students to read is only a matter of giving them literature to which they can relate on a semantic, rather than on a grapho-phonic or syntactic, level. It is the semantic level that is the final key to understanding, enjoying, and becoming proficient readers. Careful selectivity of young adult novels provides teachers with an invaluable tool for increasing reading interest and proficiency. (HTH)

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AFFIRMING THE USE OF YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE IN THE CLASSROOM -- A LITTLE PSYCHOLOGY OF READING!

Jan Fisher
June 8, 1984

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The objective of this paper is to affirm and endorse the use of Young Adult literature in the secondary classroom and to argue its superiority over the classics in terms of challenging students to read. (Theories of those who support the Psycholinguistic Model of Reading are used to help establish credibility.)

RECOGNIZING AND TAKING OWNERSHIP OF THE READING PROBLEM EXISTENT AMONG OUR YOUNG ADULT READERS

Reading fiction is one of the most worthwhile and uplifting experiences we have at our disposal. The cost is minimal; there is no extra training required beyond the middle school, and we can make our own hours!

Robert Penn Warren, three time Pulitzer Prize winner for literature, suggests that we enjoy reading fiction because:

1. We like it.
2. There is conflict in it -- and conflict is the center of life.
3. Its conflict wakes us up from the tedium of everyday life.
4. It allows us to vent our emotions with tears, laughter, love and hate.
5. We hope its story will give us a clue to our own life story.
6. It releases us from life's pressures by allowing us to escape into other people's lives. (Trelease, 1982:27)

Sadly enough, most adolescents don't read for pleasure. "Reading is work" they say and to prove it 70% of 233,000 sixth graders polled in 1980 by the California Department of Education reported that they rarely read for pleasure. (Trelease, 1982:25)

Why? We have taught our children HOW to read without providing instructional guidance which will ultimately instill in students a DESIRE to read. Consequently, whatever reading skills students lack by the time they reach middle school is due in large part to the fact that they are <u>not</u> reading. For it is true that the more we read, the more highly skilled readers we become.

We need to first recognize this problem and then, to use some psychology of reading to bring about a change. As Jim Trelease (1982:29), author of <u>The Read Aloud Book</u> has said, "A Nation where 90% of the children can read and choose to read, instead of the present 50% is not inconceivable."

FIRST, WHAT ARE THE OBJECTIVES IN THE TEACHING OF READING IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOLS?

It is critical that a secondary reading teacher wrestle with this question and consider her own objectives in light of it. Listed below in order of priority are five critical goals for the secondary reading teacher.

1. To instill a genuine appreciation of literature -- which means having the child experience reading in a positive way -- as a mode of relaxation as enjoyable as any other media. (And God knows the competitions of the 80's in terms of media is enormous! A Gallup Poll taken during the 70's revealed that 82% of the elementary grade children polled had not read a book in the preceding month, although they had averaged over one hundred hoursof television during the same time period. /Trelease, 1982: 25)

2. To enable students to bring from the reading experience an understanding of humanity, so that they might be better equipped to deal with mankind.

3. To gain a deeper understanding of the literary "art form" through the study and recognition of the literary tools and techniques used by writers such as: theme, symbolism, inference, irony, metaphor, simile, plot, character, setting.

4. To view literature as a comfortable extension of the peer group in which social and emotional questions are answered and different roles are vicariously tried on for size.

5. To bring from the experience of reading a better grasp of the mechanics of writing.

In essence these objectives seek first to entice today's adolescent, who may well be turned off to reading, into a life-long appreciation of books. Once having accom plished this, a genuine effort to grasp the mechanics of the author <u>may</u> follow. Then again, it may not. Yet, <u>in beginning</u> with one's priority set on stylistic enrichment and the understanding of literary devices a teacher risks to gain none of the above.

The obvious question to be asked is: "How does one most successfully go about teaching a "love" of books?" Frank Smith (1982:4) has said that a child is not taught to read but learns through reading. The same concept is true for literature appreciation. It cannot be taught: it must be experienced. Now the question becomes: "What kind of a reading experience will we give secondary students?"

WHAT ARE THE CLASSICS?

Once described by Mark Twain (O'Donnell, 1983:48) as "books people praised, but didn't read," the classics are those titles all of us over the age of thirty remember well. For the required reading of Tale of Two Cities, All's Quiet on the Western Front, The Red Badge of Courage, and others make them familiar topics of conversation, if nothing more. (And "what more?" would be an interesting question!) More recently, English teacher Nancy D. Kersell asked her juniors for a brief definition of the classics. This is a sampling of the replies:

1. A classic is a book which is no good, but is thought to be a masterpiece.
2. A classic is something with an underlying meaning.
3. When I think of a classic, I think of how boring it's going to be!
4. A classic is a book all the "schooled" people tell us we are supposed to read and write.
5. A classic has stood the test of time.
6. A classic is an old novel that is written so that you cannot understand it.
7. A classic is a book that through the years keeps the same message that might be useful in growing up. (1983:26)

Amazingly enough, one of these definitions does hold weight with a considerable number of professionals. Executive Director of the N.C.T.E., John Maxwell (O'Donnell, 1983:48) defines classics as "books which withstand the passage of time." Other descriptions include "time-tested" "durable", and of "literary heritage". Ironically, very few YA novels are old enough to be given

the test of time. Those that are, however, Seventeenth Summer, Catcher in the Rye, and A Separate Peace, have weathered the years quite well and classics they generally are agreed to be!

Many teachers agree that classics are as difficult to define as they are to read. Yet, along with the survival of time, classics are lovingly guarded by some for their stylistic prestige. It is this stylistic prominence which elevates the classic to the high throne -- the nobility of literature, so to speak. Yet it is this elevation that makes appreciation and relaxation unattainable for the young adult. G. Robert Carlsen, the "Dr. Spock of children's literature," has written:

> It is also true that classic literature is one of the most difficult, most subtle and most mature expressions of human beings, so it is no surprise that an understanding and enjoyment of the classics comes, if at all, fairly late in a reader's growth. (O'Donnell, 1983:48)

This assessment is not a surprise when one considers the fact that the novels described as classics were not written with the adolescent reader in mind, and herein lies a crucial difference between the classics and YA literature. It is a fact that George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the other "classic" authors had no intention of writing for anyone other than an adult audience.

Robert C. Small has written, "The generally accepted goal of a high school literature program is to place the student in the position of incapacity while the teacher is elevated to that of translator. In contrast, when the subject of a book is a teenager the balance of power is changed." Small continues with an applicable analogy:

> Anyone wanting to teach a novice how a steam engine or an internal combustion engine works would be foolish to start with a T.V.A. generating plant because this would be too complex and would have too many refinements to cover up the essential workings. (Donelson and Nilsen, 1980:371)

Although I enjoy reading the classics, teaching a classic is nearly analogous to the "bottom-up" theory of teaching reading. Before one can comprehend, one is taught to understand each feature: plot, symbolism, theme, character, setting, style, inference, irony etc., etc. While it is possible to have the classics become part of the secondary curriculum, I'm not so sure that it can ever become part of a rewarding experience for students. Adolescents enjoy reading for two reasons: because they can easily identify with the central character and/or to seek new information in regard to social or personal concerns. It is not until the college years that a student can fully appreciate the deep social and philosophical concerns and the sophisticated art forms which exist in the classics. Like Frank Smith, I believe that "the effort to read through decoding is largely futile and unnecessary." (Smith, 1982: 92)

SO -- WHY DO THE CLASSICS CONTINUE TO HANG AROUND?

A study done by Barbara J. Samuels (1983: 86) is worth consideration. Based on a national survey of a random sampling of English Journal subscribers, (the final statistics were compiled based on 286 questionnaires, representing a 68% return of the total mailed), Ms. Samuels gives the following reasons why most teachers were influenced to put classics into their curriculum:

1. Teachers have not read YA literature themselves and are not familiar with the genre.
2. Many teachers do not believe YA literature sufficiently challenging in structure and style to be taught to average and above average high school students.
3. English teachers believe they should expose students to time-tested classics, thus developing a "taste" in literature.

It is interesting to note that reasons of censorship and/or school or school board regulations are noticeably absent from this list. I will respond to the second reason under: DEMYTHOLOGIZING THE "TOO EASY" MYTH. However, at this point I will say that I think that we need to be very hesitant about making such distinctions

as "above average" and "below average". This label implies that the above average reader has already dealt with the social and emotional and philosophical concerns which come with adolescence, and which are an inherent part of YA literature. We cannot assume this and most importantly it is in the resolution of these real life issues that YA literature achieves its greatest potential as a necessary part of the secondary reading curriculum. And to the first "reason" why teachers do not use YA literature as part of their curriculum, I can only sorrowfully say that this is not only the student's very real loss, but the teacher's as well.

YA LITERATURE -- THE COMING OF AGE

Juvenile literature, written especially with young people in mind, first appeared around the 1940's. The first paperback as we know it was The Good Earth which appeared in 1938.(Donelson and Nilsen, 1980: 144) Seventeenth Summer, written while Maureen Daley was a college student, was probably the first, single most popular book published for adolescent girls. (Donelson and Nilsen, 1980:144) Around 1967, with the publication of The Outsiders, Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones, and later The Pigman came the birth of realism in young adult novels as it exists today. Typically young adult books are published by the juvenile division of the publishing house (ie, Laurel Leaf, Signa Vista, Greenwillow) and they are read by persons between the ages of twelve and seventeen.

DEMYTHOLOGIZING THE "TOO EASY" MYTH

There is an existing myth that YA literature is simplified to accommodate low reading skills. Yet, degree of difficulty is very difficult to measure. A highly complex plot, such as one finds in the YA novels by Madeline L'Engle, will increase the difficulty of the reading level -- measured only in terms of vocabulary by the book publishers. A good example of this paradox is Madeline L'Engle's Wrinkle in Time. Dell Publishing Company lists the reading level

in their catalogue as "5th grade R.L.". Yet, I myself read the same book three times before I could feel comfortable enough with my understanding of this complex plot to recommend it to my students. In 1977 the English Department at the University of Missouri accepted a Ph.D. dissertation of the same book! (Donelson and Nilsen, 1980:398) There obviously must be some substance to the story! A survey by Kenneth Donelson and Alleen Nilsen (1980:398) reported seven doctoral dissertations during the 70's dealing with YA literature.

The fact of the matter is one cannot always correlate reading level and literary sophistication, a juxtaposition which I feel helps to make this literature so worthwhile in the classroom. While it is true that the YA novel is usually shorter in length than the adult novel or classic, this doesn't necessarily correlate with sophistication of style or complexity of plot. There are many young adult novels in which the complexity of plot and structure would challenge even the professional literary critic -- I Am the Cheese, A Wrinkle in Time Trilogy, The Pigman, The Chocolate War just to mention a few.

YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE AND HAVIGURST'S TEN DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS

Sadly, by the time a child has entered middle school, reading is probably the least of his enjoyments. He may not be reading, but as an adolescent there are ten developmental tasks (Havigurst) which are sure to keep him busy:

1. Achieving new and more mature relations with agemates of both sexes.
2. Achieving a masculine or feminine social role.
3. Accepting one's physique and using the body effectively.
4. Achieving emotional independence of parents and other adults.
5. Achieving assurance of economic independence.
6. Selecting and preparing for an occupation.
7. Preparing for marriage and family life.
8. Developing intellectual skills and concepts necessary for civic reponsibility.

9. Desiring and achieving socially reponsible behavior.
10. Acquiring a set of values and an ethical system as a guide to behavior. (Donelson and Nilsen, 1980: 144)

Quite a case load! You can ask an adolescent, as I have, what this list has to do with him and he'll tell you immediately the list represents his everyday thought and activity.

Teachers are obviously faced with the critical dilemma of getting students to read. With such an overload of developmental tasks, it makes little sense to introduce the classics -- a kind of bottom-up activity in decoding! It makes much more sense to introduce students to YA literature to which they can bring their own experience -- a kind of top-down reading experience.

Novels like One Fat Summer, Summerboy, A Figure of Speech, A Small Civil War, Edgar Allan, The Outsiders, Rumblefish, Durango Street, Jock and Jill, Second Star to the Right and many others, give a child an opportunity to extend his peer group, to try out life roles, to deal with life's problems and face life's challenges in a fictional environment. Reading YA literature is an acceptably healthy means by which students can work through the ten developmental tasks. In fact, it would be easy to identify three to five applicable YA novels to coincide with each one of the developmental tasks. There is purpose and meaning in YA literature:

> Any book that students cannot read, cannot understand and see meaning in, cannot discuss, is not, for them, a work of literature, however great scholars and critics may think that work to be. (Small, 1980: 23)

YA LITERATURE AS A SOURCE OF INFORMATION

For those who worry that pleasure is a waste of time and that all education must be a fact-finding mission, it is imperative to note that students do receive information from this type of reading -- but not in the usual sense of the word.

Rather, they receive information as Smith defines information -- that which helps reduce the alternatives in the decision-making process. Because their reading allows them to "try out" problem roles and situations, the alternatives in real life situations have been dealt with and evaluated. Smith makes a valid point concerning television which I think might be somewhat analogous to reading adolescent literature:

> T.V. is seen as either a source of information or entertainment with little regard for the experience itself. (1982: 23)

Similarly, YA literature may not be a fact-finding process, but rather an experiential process which prepares students to face real life issues.

WHY DO TEENS ENJOY READING YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE?

I recently asked this question to a number of my students who are now, after having been in my literature class for two years, avid readers. My only claim to fame here is having introduced twenty students who had done very little outside reading to the appropriate books. (There is somewhat of a matching process occurring here which I will briefly discuss later.) In response to my question, they answered:

1. Young adult books usually deal with feelings, and different experiences which attract me even more.
2. I like to read young adult literature because the kids in the books are going through either what I have already experienced or will experience.
3. I read young adult literature because most of the authors write realistically, and I can relate to what problems this certain teenager has.
4. I read young adult literature because it deals with some of the problems we as young people have or will have to face. This way you have sort of already experienced some of the feelings.
5. I like to read young adult literature because some of the books have the same problems that I do. They get me interested in the book. The books show what would happen if you did something that would not be too pleasant.

6. I really never read much before seventh grade. Now I am reading and I enjoy it very much. Sometimes it helps me cope with my own problems.
7. I find YA literature interesting because it tells a little about myself as I grow.
8. Young adult literature helps me understand my life and how good it is. And it allows me to see how others live.

Clearly, one sees in these reponses the correlation between Havigurst's developmental tasks and the reading of Young Adult literature.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NON-VISUAL INFORMATION IN THE SECONDARY READING PROGRAM

Students definitely bring their background to what they read, and this is of crucial importance in what they are willing to read. One cannot simply hand a student a YA novel and assume that he will like it.

For example, city kids relate to S.E. Hinton, Alice Childress, Mary McCrackin, Frank Bonham, Norma Klein, Virginia Hamilton, Hannah Green because these authors deal with issues that are most familiar to city kids, ie, gangs, poverty, crime, drugs, divorce, sex alienation, and loneliness. Whereas suburban middle class kids enjoy Lois Duncan, Katherine Paterson, Lois Lowry, Norma Mazer, Harry Mazer,Paul Zindel, Paula Fox, Cynthia Voight. Why? Mostly, I believe, because these writers deal with death and peer pressure (as do the others, but to a lesser degree; and conversely, these authors deal with loneliness, alienation, divorce, sex, etc.). Suburban children are more inclined to fear death more than other stresses of life -- simply because they fortunately do not have to confront as many of the other issues. Lois Duncan's mysteries are popular with both groups because they give students a much needed opportunity to escape and fantasize.

Last year, an eighth grade male suburban middle class student let me know that he had not read for quite awhile, and he really had no motivation to do so. Seven months later he recorded his forty-fourth book. This year, David

reserves books at the library -- Newbery books, honor books, fantasy books. In fact, he now reviews books and recommends titles for me which I know I can't get to. What was the reason for success? Getting the appropriate books into his hands.

This year, I received Humberto into my literature class. Humberto is intelligent, yet cataracts have made seeing without contacts impossible, and motivation nonexistent. Humberto is of Spanish descent. He is a city kid. I carefully considered my choice before handing him a book -- it really is a life or death issue as far as motivation to read is concerned. I gave him Durango Street, by Frank Bonham. Two days later he was back for another book "just like that one." Treading cautiously, I gave him Rumble Fish, by S.E. Hinton, One week later he reports proudly that he has finished another book!

There is really no secret in motivating students to read. It's only a matter of giving them that literature to which they can relate, to which they can bring their "non-visual" background. Again, Frank Smith's view that understanding is the basis of learning and not the net consequence (1982: 2) is of great value in making book selections for secondary school students.

IN CONCLUSION

It is common knowledge that problem readers in the secondary school generally fall into one of the following categories: Black, Hispanic (or any foreign nationality), Poor, and/or Male. In terms of the three types of information used in the reading process, many of these high school students may be adept on the grapho-phonic or syntactic level. The real failure on the part of the high school is the failure to provide these students with relevant, meaningful materials to which these students can relate on a semantic level. Even in the elementary school, we have not taken into consideration the

relevancy of the materials to the student when we teach phonics and grammar. To be successful teachers of reading and literature we must consider a learner's background information or experience. Because I believe that it is the semantic level which is the final key to understanding, enjoying and becoming proficient readers.

This, then, becomes my final argument for the use of YA literature in the secondary classroom. Careful selectivity (based on pre-reading) of YA novels provides the teacher with an invaluable tool for increasing reading proficiency. In doing this we provide secondary students with a top-down reading experience, allowing them the opportunity to be successful on the semantic level of reading, thereby capitalizing on their strengths rather than their weaknesses. We can then accomplish our objectives in the teaching of reading: an appreciation of the art form, a better understanding of mankind, a tool for working out adolescent problems, and a better grasp of the art of writing.

Finally, a statement by Kenneth Goodman (1970: 21) seems appropriate:

> Though reading and the application of the fruits of reading are separate, it must always be remembered that a reading is never pursued for its own sake, even in literature. If the reader finds no "payoff" he will not continue to read. This is as true in the stages of proficient reading.

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